

# The Washington Star Struggles To Survive Circulation Battle

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WASHINGTON, March 1—One day last week there appeared in The Washington Star an advertisement headed "Employees Open Letter to Residents of the Washington Metro Area."

The ad, running a quarter-page, was paid for by Star employees, and in it they took note of the "many day-by-day changes and improvements" in the afternoon daily. They went on to suggest to residents of the city and its suburbs that "you take another look at the new Washington Star."

Paying for the ad was neither the first nor the greatest contribution Star employees have made recently toward keeping their paper alive. In December, many of them, including reporters and editors, agreed to work a four-day work week for four days pay to avoid layoffs, and still other union employees agreed to work irregular schedules and accept early retirement bonuses.

But the Star is fighting for its life, and it is an unusual struggle since the paper has a daily, Monday through Friday, circulation of about 410,000, normally enough to sustain a newspaper in an area this size. Its Saturday circulation is about 343,000 and Sunday circulation about 345,000.

## Loss of a Voice

The outcome of the battle for survival will determine whether the nation's capital will become a one-newspaper city and hence lose a moderate political voice. The Star's competition is The Washington Post, a morning paper, rich, prestigious, politically liberal. It has a daily circulation of about 533,000, with a Saturday circulation of 506,000 and a Sunday sale of 702,000.

The area in which the two newspapers are competing has a population of two million, again normally enough to support two newspapers. But newspapers in Washington have singular problems.

Like elsewhere, advertising is down because of the dragging economy. But in Washington the situation is complicated by the fact that advertising depends on business and the biggest business in this city is government, which does not advertise.

So even before the economy began to flag, The Post's competitors had trouble competing. In July, 1972, the last Post competitor but one, The Washington Daily News, went out of

business, selling its name and some of its assets to The Star, which became The Washington Star-News. This Feb. 21, the name was changed to The Washington Star, in large type, with "and Daily News" in small type, like an afterthought.

Washington is largely a parochial city, its interests often narrowly confined to politics and government, and a large percentage of the people living in its suburbs are transients who return to their home states when a new Administration takes office. Their interest in the traditional continuing fare of suburban news is slight, or temporary at best.

There are other problems in making a major effort to cover suburban news: manpower. With its larger news-gathering and editing staff, The Post could put three reporters into the suburbs for every one that The Star could assign. The Star has a news department staff of about 250 persons.

The biggest thing going for The Star in its battle for a viable place here is its new management. Last July, Joe L. Allbritton, a Houston businessman with interests in banking and insurance, bought a controlling interest in what was then called The Star-News.

## 37 Pct. Interest

He agreed to pay \$25-million for a 37 per cent interest in Washington Star Communications Inc., which owns the newspaper and also operates three television stations, two radio stations and a news syndicate. Mr. Allbritton acquired, too, enough proxy votes to assure him of control over the company.

During the last four years the paper has lost \$15-million, including \$7.7-million last year, and has been kept afloat only by the corporation's broadcasting revenues. In addition, Mr. Allbritton lent the paper \$5-million last year and that, he says, was used up in about three months.

However, when the revenues of the corporation are measured against the losses at The Star, the corporation has been operating at a deficit of only about \$2-million a year.

Mr. Allbritton is apparently willing to sustain that sort of loss for a few years.

"I'm not the United States Mint," he said in January, "but I'm hopeful. It's not too far before I think I can see the end of the tunnel and turn things around at The Star."

Still, there is a hitch in this. The Federal Communications Commission has required some

newspapers to divest themselves of broadcasting facilities owned in their circulation areas, and without the Star-owned television station in Washington it is unlikely the corporation can achieve the cash flow to keep the newspaper going.

Mr. Allbritton is still awaiting an F.C.C. ruling on whether the corporation will be allowed to keep its broadcasting facilities and the newspaper. If the ruling goes against him, he has several options available, including taking his \$5-million loss and pulling out of the deal in which he purchased the paper.

If the ruling is in his favor, Mr. Allbritton is prepared to fight for The Star. As publisher of The Star, he is invited to the White House, he appears on television and he is a power in Washington. Although he generally shuns personal publicity, his new life as a publisher is a heady one and not one he is likely to give up easily, his friends say.

## Brought in Bellows

He is looking for a permanent home here for his family, and he has brought in as editor of the paper James G. Bellows, a creative journalist who was an associate editor of The Los Angeles Times.

The Star was purchased by Mr. Allbritton from members of three families that had controlled it since its founding in 1852. Before he took over, the executive offices were rife with nepotism. This is no longer the case.

Mr. Allbritton has shaken up the paper's business and advertising departments, and has hired James J. Daly as vice president of the corporation. In 1971 Mr. Daly retired as vice president and general manager of The Washington Post, where he was credited with having given the paper its great advertising strength.

In the area of news gathering and presentation it is difficult for The Star to expand much for the moment. Mr. Bellows has already changed the paper's make-up, tightening it considerably, so that more news is now going into the same amount of space.

## Q and A Feature

He has started a "Q & A" feature that runs each day on the front page. In it a prominent figure in or behind the news is asked questions by The Star and gives his answers.

And at the bottom of page one Mr. Bellows says, "Each day a long, thorough piece here to stay."



The New York Times  
Joe L. Allbritton, publisher of Washington Star.

of reporting that explains some aspect of the news.

It will be more difficult to increase The Star's staff because the reporters now there voluntarily took a 20 per cent pay cut as part of the four-day work week, and it is hard to justify new hirings, unless absolutely necessary, under those conditions.

But there undoubtedly will be an increase in the coverage of civil service news, since so many Washington residents are civil servants, and Mr. Allbritton is said to be unhappy with the quality of the editorial page, so a shakeup is expected there also.

"We're not going to try to be another Washington Post," Mr. Bellows says. "But we're going to try to present the news in a special way, try to make sense out of it and out of people's lives. We can outthink The Post and outplan them in the handling of the news."

"The Post has a jet city swinging image, and we can't compete with that going-the-street-scene route," he adds. "Making sense out of the news, with quality—that's our direction. The time cycle makes it hard for an afternoon paper, so it will be a tough struggle. But fun and think we're here to stay."